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## A PROCESSIONAL BANNER BY SPINELLO ARETINO

THE splendid banner, representing St. Mary Magdalen in majesty, which the Museum bought last October at the sale of the late Francis M. Bacon, was well known to the critic Cavalcaselle, but had dropped out of sight for many years. In the first edition, 1864, of Crowe and Cavalcaselle's *New History* (II.17) under Spinello Aretino one may read:

"A banner painted on both sides for the Brotherhood of S. Sepolcoro at Gubbio, now in the hands of the Marchese Ranghiacsi (at Gubbio), has all the character of the master, and is one of the best examples in private hands. On one face is the Flagellation. On the other, the Magdalen, enthroned amidst a glory of eight playing angels, holds in her right hand the ointment, and in her left, the Crucifix. Four brothers of the Fraternity kneel in pairs below; the whole enclosed in painted architecture adorned with medallions of saints."

A footnote adds: "Of these only vestiges remain."

Nineteen years later, 1883, the Italian edition (II.453) of the *New History* repeats the notice adding merely that the figures are slightly under life size. Still twenty years later, 1903, Langton Douglas's new edition (II.263) says that the banner was "lately" in the Ranghiacsi collection. The notice presumably derives from Cavalcaselle himself, who died in October 1897. Sometime between 1883 and that date, this splendid piece was sold and eventually followed the drift of things to America. As to the attribution to Spinello Aretino, Mr. Berenson, seeing the banner in the Museum the other day, immediately and independently confirmed Cavalcaselle's opinion. Upon the joint verdict of two connoisseurs of the first class, we may well be content to stand. I think the piece sheds light upon Spinello's artistic beginnings. But first one or two material and historical considerations.

To Cavalcaselle's excellent description already quoted, we need only add that the damaged architectural border with its medallions has been cut off and the back

of the banner, representing the Flagellation of Christ, concealed by the new canvas lining. The robe of the Magdalen is scarlet, her tunic rather pale green, the draperies of the angels alternating between this pale green and rose. The gold is uncommonly pale. The whole thing is softly radiant in color. At some remote time all the contours were coarsely reinforced in red, in order undoubtedly, to make the design carry well in open air processions. This disfigurement is noticeable only on near view. The four kneeling brothers evidently belonged to a flagellant order; for their backs are left bare between the hood and the shirt, and they carry knotted scourges in their hands. The symbol of the order, the pot of precious ointment, is marked in outline on their shoulders.

Concerning the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre at Gubbio I have been unable to learn anything directly. It was clearly one of those numerous penitential orders of flagellants which were founded about the middle of the fourteenth century. One may assume that their chapel contained a model of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, such as one can still see in the church of that name at Bruges or at S. Pancrazio, Florence. The processions in which this banner was carried would have been held in Passion week, and the height of the celebration would have been on Good Friday, when between scourging and solemn litanies these devotees lashed themselves into a pious agony more tolerable to contemplate at our remove of time. It is probable that during the year the order gave itself to the service of the dead, much as the Confraternity of the Miserecordia still does at Florence, and that its splendid banner, as was the custom, was safely kept in a case with doors.

It may be asked how the Magdalen, traditionally the protectress of repentant fallen women, came to be the patron saint of a penitential order of the Holy Sepulchre. Christian legend has always identified the Magdalen with Mary of Bethany, whose oblation of the precious ointment was taken by Christ himself as prophetic of his impending death and burial. When Judas

**Iscariot** complained, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" Christ replied, "Let her alone, against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you, but me ye have not always." (John xii. 7, 8.) All the Gospels represent the Magdalen as present at the burial of Christ by Joseph of Arimathea. Matthew xxvii, 61 says with graphic simplicity, "And there was Mary Magdalen and the other Mary sitting over against the sepulchre." But mediaeval literature and art gave the Magdalen a much more prominent part in the preparation of the body of Christ for the grave. In pictured representations of this theme for a hundred years or more before this banner was painted, she may be seen often holding the feet of the dead Christ while the Virgin Mary holds the head. Among many I need only mention Giotto's fresco in the Arena Chapel at Padua. In the famous devotional book "*Meditations on the Life of Christ*," written after the middle of the thirteenth century and often ascribed to St. Bonaventura, the Magdalen's ministrations are described at length and most touchingly. We are told that when the body was lowered from the cross she begged to hold the feet at which she had found favor in Christ's life. During the hasty preparation of the body for the entombment, we are told that she washed the legs and feet with her tears and wiped and kissed them. It was unquestionably such pious inventions of the unknown author of the "*Meditations*," a widely read book, that associated the Magdalen with the burial of Christ and made her a fitting patroness for a Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre.

Umbria is the great region for processional banners. Many of an exceedingly interesting kind were shown at the Umbrian Regional Exhibition of 1908. Several of these *Gonfaloni*, which were carried processionally by religious confraternities, especially in plague time, are reproduced in Umberto Gnoli's convenient album of the exhibition, "*Arte Umbra*," Bergamo, 1908. But all other examples are of the later years of the fifteenth century or of the first

years of the sixteenth. Spinello's Magdalen, within my knowledge, is the only surviving gonfalon of Gothic type with gold background, the sole representative to us of thousands of splendid pieces. Particularly exposed to damage through the flimsiness of the material and to rejection through swift change of style, all the rest apparently have perished. This banner remains on its original tough linen through a kind of miracle. One must imagine it still more splendid with its original borders, swaying in the bearer's hands through the hilly streets of Gubbio, with maddened hooded flagellants staggering in noisy ecstasy before and behind. One must imagine it in use to perceive what a precious relic of the middle ages it is. No museum boasts anything rarer. The only early banner which at all compares with it in beauty is the St. Catherine in majesty amid the Seven Virtues, in the Musée Jacquemart André, Paris, which was signed by Pietro di Giovanni di Ambrogio of Siena, in the year 1444.

Upon Spinello's artistic origins I think this piece casts new light. The attribution itself may best be verified from the signed Madonna of 1391 in the Florence Academy, and from the well documented Madonna of about 1384 in the Fogg Museum, Cambridge. The banner is, I believe, to be set considerably earlier, probably in the sixties, and it betrays at every point the influence of Andrea Orcagna. If I had not identified it as the banner seen by Cavalcaselle at Gubbio, I should properly have described it as of Orcagna's school. The frank, rather pale coloring is like his, and quite unlike the richer schemes inherited by the many followers of Taddeo Gaddi. The careful, logical, and rather simple arrangement of the drapery is Orcagnesque. There is hardly a trace of the rolls and flying folds which most late Gothic painters of Florence took from Siennese paintings and French miniatures. Relatively the tradition of form, as Crowe and Cavalcaselle justly remarked of Spinello, remains Giottesque. The fine oval of the Madonna's

<sup>1</sup>Reproduced and described by George La Fenestre in *Gaz. d. B.-A.* Dec. 1913.



SAINT MARY MAGDALEN  
BY  
SPINELLO ARETINO  
A PROCESSIONAL BANNER

face is distinctive, and similar to the forms in Orcagna's Descent of the Holy Ghost, in the Badia, and in the standing Madonna in the Apostoli. (See Sirén's "Giotto.") The placing of the figure on a low throne without a back, seen from a rather high position, may be noted in almost all the pictures and sculptures ascribed to Andrea and to his brother Nardo. It may be seen in the Virgin and the Virtues in the famous carved tabernacle for Orsanmichele. The charming angel with a bagpipe in the banner occurs in very similar form in the tabernacle, and in Andrea's altarpiece painted for the Strozzi Chapel in Sta. Maria Novella. These resemblances are so striking that we must assume that young Spinello deliberately formed his style through imitation of Andrea. This is compatible with the little we know of Spinello's life. He was born about the year 1333 and probably painted an altarpiece for the monks of Camaldoli as early as 1361. At this time Andrea Orcagna had finished the marble tabernacle (1359), and with his brother Nardo had just finished the Strozzi Chapel (1357?). Vasari states that Spinello worked in his youth at Florence and was the pupil of that poor follower of Taddeo Gaddi, Jacopo del Casentino. Jacopo in 1349 entered the Company of St. Luke at Florence, and probably remained in the city until 1354 (Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Hutton ed. 1, 418). It is at this time that Spinello, then in his late 'teens, is likely to have been Jacopo's pupil. Since Spinello was not registered in the Physician's Guild at Florence until 1386, it is probable that his early capacity in that city was merely that of student or minor assistant. It is very likely that he stayed there until the Orcagna tabernacle was unveiled in 1359. Spinello's peculiar triumphs were won towards the end of his long life, at the Campo Santo, Pisa, and the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena. In these clear and animated narratives he remains true to the forms he had drawn from Orcagna. Very likely if we had all the compositions which Andrea painted for Sta. Maria Novella and Sta. Croce, we should find that Spinello was his debtor as well in the matter of narrative method. For the rest the leading is that

of the Lorenzetti. I cannot at all agree with Venturi ("Storia dell' Arte Italiana," V. 864) that Spinello as a story teller derives from Agnolo Gaddi. As I close this article I learn that Count Vitzthum in an article in "L'Arte," 1906, fasc. 6, has expressed very similar views as to Spinello's artistic dependence on Orcagna. It is a pleasure to bring collateral evidence to the hypothesis of this accomplished scholar. For that matter there has always been an ambiguous ground between Orcagna and Spinello. The three saints from the Hospital Church of Giovanni and Niccolò near Florence, National Gallery 581, were bought as Spinellos, but restored by Cavalcaselle (Hutton ed. 1, 581, note 2) to the school of Orcagna; and by Sirén in his "Giotto" to Andrea himself. According to Vasari, Spinello died in his native Arezzo at the advanced age of seventy-seven or more, being frightened to death by an hallucination based on his own design for a Lucifer. The mortuary records give the date as March 14, 1410. Vasari possibly stretched his townsman's life a little. Spinello was the last of the great Gothic narrative painters who had been trained under direct imitators of Giotto. He had painted many works, but none more ingratiating than this banner which so fully conveys his early enthusiasm for the noble manner of the great Orcagna.

FRANK JEWETT MATHER, JR.

#### AUTOGRAPH LETTERS IN THE LIBRARY

**A**MONG the autograph letters of American and foreign artists recently presented to the Library by Mr. Samuel P. Avery, are a number of peculiar interest, and to some of these reference is here made.

In a letter addressed to the Rev. Dr. William E. Channing, by Washington Allston, dated Cambridge Port, 27 Aug. 1838-40 (?), Allston refers to a portrait of Mr. Phillips which he was requested to send to the residence of Dr. Channing, and gives two reasons why the picture was not sent: the first, "because there is nobody here now